

Aging Dallas church commits facility to kingdom purposes

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Historic Gaston Avenue Baptist Church relocated to northeast Dallas and took on a new identity more than 20 years ago to reach young families. However, when [Gaston Oaks Baptist Church](#) took a hard look at itself after two decades, it saw an aging congregation dwindling in number and a facility not living up to its potential.



Gaston Oaks Pastor Gary

Cook. (Photo by Leah Allen) So, the church cast a new vision—to make its campus available for other congregations and ministries as Gaston Christian Center.

Every week, five congregations—each representing a different ethnic group—meet at Gaston Oaks. The gathering for the original English-speaking congregation may attract only 70 people, but between 500 and 600 worship each Sunday in the facility.

To make use of buildings with empty space involves “outside-of-the-box”

thinking, Gaston Oaks Pastor Gary Cook told a recent Dallas Baptist Association Pastors' Conference.

When the congregation moved to northeast Dallas in 1990, "they felt like there was a purpose, a reason the Lord led them out to this particular place," Cook said. "For whatever reason, it really hadn't become very apparent yet.

"Something entirely different"

"As we began to consider and think about the future, it began to dawn on us that perhaps our future was not what our church thought it was when they moved out here in 1990—that maybe our future was to be something entirely different than we had imagined."

Members' attitudes changed, Cook said. The original vision, which had not materialized, said, "We need more young people."

More recently, they began to ask, "Is it possible that God may want us to fill this church with people that aren't like us?"

At one time, the church had a history of sending out numerous missionaries. Suddenly, the mission field was coming to them at their Greenville Avenue and Royal Lane location— "the middle of everywhere" as Cook described it.

Church leaders began envisioning a future for the facility and how it could be used "in perpetuity for kingdom purposes," he said.

Diversity arrives

Hispanic, Bhutanese, Karen and African congregations share the facility with the original English-speaking congregation.

Rather than attempt to fit everyone's preferences in one service, Cook said,

the church found it best to provide each congregation its own worship space.

“They need that fellowship, they need that community, they need that encouragement from each other,” he said. “Each of them worships very differently.”

The Bhutanese practice an emotional and demonstrative worship style, whereas the Karen are more formal, he said.

Every couple of months, the congregations have a combined service. They sing in different languages, and each pastor preaches the same five-minute sermon.

Medical, dental clinic

The facility recently opened its doors to the Healing Hands Ministry—a clinic that provides medical and dental care to the uninsured in northeast Dallas.

“Gaston Oaks and Healing Hands have the same core values,” said Janna Gardner, the clinic’s executive director. “We base the organization on the relationship with the Lord our God.”

Gaston Oaks hopes more organizations like Healing Hands use space in the facility.

“We’re trying gradually to find nonprofit ministries that are doing things to help people in the name of Christ,” Cook said. “They are not church-connected, but they are Christian-based.”

Gaston Oaks understands the need to prepare for the future, he said. As the congregation continues to decrease in number, members realize they eventually may need to discontinue worship services.

Regardless, Cook said, members want their facility to be used for kingdom purposes. So, they are moving toward creating Gaston Christian Center.

“The idea is that someday, the church will deed the property to a board of Christian, likeminded people that will be responsible for upkeep of the building,” he explained.

A model for other churches

Gaston Oaks has presented a model for other churches in similar dilemmas, said Bob Dean, executive director of [Dallas Baptist Association](#).

“This church has thought seriously about legacy,” he said. “They are answering the question, ‘How can we maximize this facility for the advance of God’s kingdom?’”

Church buildings are meant to be used more than a few hours each week, Cook said. “Thinking outside the box” means finding ways to use the facilities to continue to spread the gospel.